



Thousands jam Ottawa's Lansdowne Park for the consecration of Canada to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on June 22, 1947. Photo courtesy Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto

Seventy years ago, Canada was consecrated to Mary during the Marian Congress

By [Deborah Gyapong, Canadian Catholic News](#)

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OTTAWA – Seventy years ago, Ottawa, a sleepy government town dominated by the logging industry, had never seen anything like the 1947 Marian Congress.

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Hosted by the Archdiocese of Ottawa to mark the 100th anniversary of the diocese's founding, the Marian Congress drew an estimated 200,000 pilgrims from June 17-22. News reports from the time say the city doubled in size that week.

"In its day the Congress was the largest religious conference in North America, with thousands of visitors coming from all parts of North America to witness this week of prayer," said Archbishop Terrence Prendergast in a homily at the June 8 Diocesan Feast marking the 170th anniversary of the diocese.

"Its purpose besides celebrating the centenary of the Archdiocese of Ottawa was to pray for lasting peace in the world, which was the message of Our Lady at Fatima 100 years ago, a message needed even more today," he said.

For six days and nights, 24 hours a day, priests celebrated Mass, beginning a new one every half hour. One hundred priests were available to hear confessions until 3 a.m. — and found the 15 confessionals built at Lansdowne Park were not enough.

The Congress' "crowning act," according to Pope Pius XII, was the consecration of the Dominion of Canada to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on June 22, with consecration prayers read in French and in English by federal cabinet ministers Louis St. Laurent and James J. McCann.

"Obtain for the Holy Church of God peace and complete freedom; stay the rising flood of modern paganism, enkindle in the faithful the love of purity, the practice of Christian virtues and an apostolic zeal, so that the servants of God may increase in holiness and number," read a portion of the consecration text drafted by the Pope.

Today, as Canada approaches its 150th birthday, Canada's Catholic bishops have been invited by the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to re-consecrate Canada to the Virgin Mary on July 1 or another appropriate date in their dioceses.

In 1947, Pope Pius XII joined the celebration by a radio address on June 19 that was broadcast to homes throughout the country, as well as on loud speakers to the overflow crowd who could not get to the "Coliseum," the sports field for the larger events.

Cardinal James McGuigan of Toronto, who served as the papal legate, was among nine cardinals who each processed wearing a cappa magna, the long red cape meant to signify their willingness to shed their blood for the faith. Bishops and priests came from 46 countries around the world.

Cardinal Pierre-Marie Gerlier, Archbishop of Lyon and Primate of the Gauls, described the Congress as "a marvel."

"As Bishop of Lourdes for eight years, I have seen magnificent celebrations; Ottawa has surpassed them all. ... It will not be possible, from now on, to evoke feasts in honour of the Blessed Virgin without recalling the name of Ottawa," the cardinal told journalists after the event.

Over the six days, an estimated one million people — many of them repeat visitors — thronged to Lansdowne Park to venerate the pilgrim statue of Our Lady of the Cape. The statue had left the Shrine at Cap-de-la-Madeleine near Trois Rivières, Que., on May 1 to process through 340 parishes and institutions. On June 17, when the Congress opened, the statue, on a specially-fitted vehicle, joined 40,000 men who processed about six kilometres from Notre Dame Cathedral, across downtown, then along the Rideau Canal to Lansdowne Park where thousands of women and children waited to greet them.

The pilgrim statue, an exact replica of Our Lady of the Cape, Queen of Canada, and Queen of the Holy Rosary, was installed in the Peace Chapel at the park. Behind her was a bank of 35,000 votive candles. So many people venerated the statue, their hands wore the paint off the Virgin's foot.

On Saturday June 21, a massive parade featuring Marian floats depicting many of the mysteries of the Rosary and scenes from the life of Mary passed down Wellington Street by the Parliament buildings.

Archbishop Alexandre Vachon had decided to host the Congress to mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of his diocese after attending an International Marian Congress in Mexico City in 1945. The ghastly carnage of World War II was on his mind as well as those of the other prelates present. He had the opportunity to celebrate Mass before the tilma showing the miraculous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. He later told people the image seemed to be “smiling at” him and “asking me to organize a great Marian Congress” in Ottawa, according to a book he commissioned to memorialize the event.

The Congress gathered the celebrities of the era, from musicians and singers, to the famous Dionne Quintuplets, then in their early teens, who consecrated themselves to Our Lady and sang for the public.

Today, there is little evidence at Lansdowne Park that such an event ever took place. All the old buildings that housed the Congress except one, the Aberdeen Pavilion, have been torn down. The area is dominated by recently-developed condos, restaurants, a 10-screen movie theatre and trendy stores. The Coliseum where the Consecration took place has been rebuilt as the home of the CFL's Ottawa Redblacks football team.

Last year, Dennis Girard, an Ottawa-born Catholic, came upon a film of the Congress produced by Fr. Maurice Proulx, a Quebec pioneer of documentary filmmaking, on the Internet.

It had fewer than 1,000 views on YouTube, leading Girard to wonder, “How come nobody knows about this?” He then obtained rights to display the film on his website CatholicinCanada.com dedicated to furthering awareness of the Marian Congress and to reviving Marian devotion.

The discovery of the film launched Girard and his wife Angelina on a quest to recover Canada’s Marian history.

Last fall, the Girards made a visit to Cap-de-la-Madeleine and asked the Shrine’s rector if the statue used at the 1947 Marian Congress still existed. They were guided to the archives of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and were shown the same statue that had been so venerated in Ottawa 70 years before.

The Oblates entrusted the Girards with the pilgrim statue which was installed permanently at Blessed Sacrament Parish in Ottawa on May 14, 2017 — Mother’s Day.

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